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Panel: "The Making of Fantasy Worlds"

Poul Anderson

Robert Silverberg

Katherine Kurtz

Ruth Berman

Larry Niven

Mythcon 51: The Mythic, the Fantastic, and the Alien

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Abstract

A panel of science fiction and fantasy authors discusses how they develop their worlds, the differences between fantasy and science fiction, and some classic works of fantasy.

Keywords

Anderson, Poul; Berman, Ruth; Fantasy—Definition; Fantasy—Techniques; Kurtz, Katherine; Niven, Larry; Science fiction—Techniques; Silverberg, Robert

PANEL: "The Making of Fantasy Worlds"

Moderator: Mr. Poul Anderson
Members: (seated stage-right to stage-left)
Robert Silverberg
Katherine Kurtz
Ruth Berman
Larry Niven (to his surprise)

Opening Remarks by Mr. Anderson:

"I'm reminded of the fellows in a hotel room one night when a drunk opened the door. He looked around, muttered 'Scuse me, wrong room,' and left. A while later, he was back. Again the apology, and the drunk left. This performance was repeated until the drunk finally asked, 'Say, are you in all the rooms?' I have that feeling today, of being everywhere in both cons. I'm only the moderator of this panel, so I hope to be less in evidence.

"You're familiar with Bob Silverberg for his science-fiction, counterscience and out-&-out fantasy. He has written unknown-world fantasy, mood pieces and 'logic-gone-mad.' Miss Kurtz is the author of the Deryni books."

Comment from the floor by Karen Anderson: "Deryni Checkmate is waiting for you at home."

Mod: "I understand I have her latest book at home. Ruth Berman is a new fan writer with a particularly lovable personality, a Star Trek fan but that's by no means her only field. She can give the viewpoint of a new pro writer."

At this point, Mr. Anderson saw Larry Niven in the audience and put a geas on him to join the panel. ("With," in the moderator's words, "a swallow of pure envy.") When Mr. Niven was seated, Mr. Anderson turned the mike over to Mr. Silverberg.

Remarks by Robert Silverberg:

"The optimum nonstructure for a panel--one mike. I don't think of myself as a fantasy writer in the Mythcon fantasy structure; I don't do much Sword-and-Sorcery. But I do create imaginary worlds. I can offer no formulae about the process. The point of origin might be a character or situation, then the world around grows by a secondary intuitive process.

"In Son of Man, the creation of the environment came first, then a man of our own time to enter that environment. It wrote itself. It was fun, and there's no point repeating it. Science-fiction is more circumscribed by 'the rules of the game.' For instance, in creating a completely alien planet, you have to consider the effects of ecology. Climate zones had to be tied together. You're creating 'synthetic reality.' The operating definitions of Son of Man were that anything went; it was the effect of a psychedelic dream fantasy.

"Contentional SF like 'Tower of Glass' deals with political and social problems on this earth we know, so it needs no new creation of a world.

"Each book is ad hoc; it has a particular nature and problem. You try to make your fantasy world appealing."

Remarks by Katherine Kurtz:

"I've created only one fantasy world so far. My world of the eleven kingdoms and the Deryni is like tenth and eleventh century England and Scotland. I'm an historian by training. I take a few minor geological liberties like filling in the English Channel and Irish Sea, but the background for the Deryni books comes from that geography. I sort-of plopped the Deryni in there. I haven't yet explained where they came from. The Deryni are a race of sorcerers; the idea of ESP as seen by Medieval societies through the eyes of the people of the eleven kingdoms. Canberra Culty, the prequel, is in the works. It relates how the corrupt Deryni regime was overthrown. Then skipping forward, I hope to pick up the Deryni world as it would be two centuries later. Skipping lets me use fresh characters and framework while keeping the same consistent pattern. Consistency gives the Deryni world a continuum. As in Star Trek, one of the true secrets of fantasy creation is internal cohesion."

Remarks by Ruth Berman:

"I've been a fantasy fan for years. Only recently has reality dawned on me. Types of secondary worlds I like? Star Trek, Dickens, Sherlock Holmes, the vaguely Medieval. I don't know how to classify Alice as fantasy."

Comments from panel members: "Political," "Dream," (possibly from Bob Silverberg: "I'd call it the Logic-Gone-Wild type.")

Ruth Berman (continuing): "A great deal in these worlds goes counter to what I believe, so I have to watch myself when writing them. The idea of aristocracy and inherited power, for example: all those dukes, barons and Sirs riding around in impregnable armor (Some Sword-and-Sorcery writers believe that aristocracy is best, but I don't happen to. So I show how a knight doesn't live up to what he should be, and how a peasant may do better.)

"I don't believe in the male-chauvinist world where muscular strength rules. Plate armor is heavy. The term Mythopoeic is wider than I mean by this; Sword-and-Sorcery is narrower. I like Tolkien and Lewis somewhat more than Williams in this world of Medieval magic. (But if I don't write this kind of world I can't have plate armor and I love plate armor.)

"Medieval religion is so Christian that it makes a problem for a Jew, as I am. For instance, Tolkien describes the ending of this world as a eucatastrophe. That's fine if you believe it, but what if you don't? So I dodge the issue."

Bob Silverberg: "Could you write convincingly about a Martian?"

Ruth Berman: "It goes back to Tolkien, 'the meaning is there which is imposed.' What is the meaning then in fantasy that draws us so strongly? Being oneself as a self, thinking, is magic. Notice how often cats are used in fantasy. I think we can impose on animals the same kind of thinking we perform ourselves. I'm about to repeat Lewis."

Poul Anderson (in response to questions from the audience): "There will be a discussion period after the panel hears Mr. Niven."

Remarks by Larry Niven:

"The only law I know of fantasy is the law of internal consistency. It has to work because you have no other restrictions. The assumptions you make for your fantasy are your own law--they are binding on you. Assume magic, humanity, long, long ago. If so, it's the basics of a civilization. Assume a werewolf, and what does a werewolf do? The magic carries its own implications.

"I have this character, Svetz, living a thousand years from now. Assume life has been kicked off the earth by pollution. Svetz is a time-traveler, but he is unaware that time-travel is fantasy. He sees a unicorn, observes that they run wild while horses are tame, and figures you have to cut the horn off before you can tame the horse. He looks for a sperm-whale and finds a sea-serpent. The roc legend probably got started when people found ostritches and thought 'If this is the chick--!' You use neotony on an ostritch and you get a roc. The axolotl is a neotonous king lizard. Once I had a man try to force a demon to appear in a pentagram drawn on his own belly.

"The worst breach of artistic integrity is to break the internal consistency of the story." (He cited an example, the end of Moorcock's Elric. Though holding the magical means to save his beloved, Elric gave up and killed himself.) "Now, if Elric had been an idiot, you could have justified that, but I'm morally sure the idea never occurred to Moorcock, either."

The question period followed; audience members discussed questions with panel members and with each other.

Q (to Ruth Berman): Going to Christian fantasy worlds: Some of the characters in Spenser's Images of Life and Faerie Queene are perfectly satisfied pagans.

A: Some of Spenser's "pagan" gods are representations of Christian symbols.

Q (same): The characters didn't realize that.

A (same): But every reader realizes that.

Q: Mr. Niven, what in God's name is "neotony?"

A:(by Poul Anderson): The axolotl is the classic example. Generation after generation, only immature forms reproduce. Only occasionally a generation becomes mature.

A (by Larry Niven): There's a theory that neotony explains why Man developed as he did, chasing antelopes and so forth.

Comment from audience: I'm normally averse to calling fantasy a type of science-fiction and not the other way around. Fantasy might be called science-fiction in which the science (the ordered body of knowledge) is mythology.

Q: Mr. Silverberg, where would you put Book of Skulls?

A: It's a book few of you have read because it's only out in a hardcover edition (applause). It's simply a novel, not science-fiction or fantasy, set in Arizona in 1971, in what may be the retreat of immortals from Atlantis (or they may be lying.) The plot turns on the various people reacting to this situation and who were or were not deluded. It doesn't matter to me if a book is SF or fantasy or whatever, it's a verbal work.

Comment from audience: Perhaps characters in a past era are nearer their fantasy or myth.

A from Poul Anderson: I might say you still have to explain how and why this is.

A from audience to Comment one: Mythology is a methodology, not a "science." SF uses the universe as we know it; fantasy uses a universe very different from the one we know.

Comment from audience: Our primitive science is simply dealing with How and Why.

Q: (to Ruth Berman) Is religion treated in the Conan books?

A: I think Howard is ducking the issue.

A (from Poul Anderson): I feel that fantasy has been drawing too much from Europe and Classical times. Why not Chinese Sword-&-Sorcery or an American Indian Witchworld?

Q: (to Silverberg) In a created world, is the magic postulated as natural law or as a science?

A: I'm now being drawn into a discussion I wanted to avoid. It depends on the book. What difference does it make to the reader? Once you set your world up, he'll believe it.

A (from Ruth Berman): I agree with Bob. Your construction has to have internal consistency, that's the most important thing. I think of the 19th Century fantasy writers going into torment asking themselves, "How much fantasy will the reader take?" and Hawthorne arguing "This isn't a novel; it's a romance."

A (from Katherine Kurtz): It's all a matter of degree and what you accept as magic.

A (from Larry Niven): There is a problem. The heavy hand of the author shows through too much unless you write the Laws of Magic for your world.

Q (to Ruth Berman): Would you say LoTR's magic wasn't so much science-sourced as having Good vs. Evil as sources?

A: I think that in Lord of the Rings, Good equals Psychology and Evil equals physics.

Q (same?): Then how do you account for the Rings? Some of them seem to be made by Elves, then in another place Sauron seems to have manufactured them.

(Several responses from the audiences on the origin, history and manufacture of the Rings)

Comment from the audience: You have to make a distinction between physical laws and fantasy laws. Does the atom behave differently in your fantasy world? Does a .45 work?

Comment from the audience: It seems there is an operative definition as to the difference between how the carbon atom and the hydrogen atom function in a human being. A trivial but significant difference. The electrical surroundings of a given atom in the brain are different than its surroundings in the gun, so why not have the atom behave differently?

A (from Larry Niven): You ask yourself, "Does being in a brain create a magic situation for an atom?" and you answer yourself "Yes."

Comment from audience on Ruth Berman's comment about Howard: Howard does take a position on gods; he describes how they are remembered from the past.

A (from Ruth Berman): In that case, he does take a position.

Glen GoodKnight enters, crosses to mike.

Poul Anderson: The time is just about right to wrap this up.

Glen: Can I make an announcement?

(Discussion ends in mirth.)